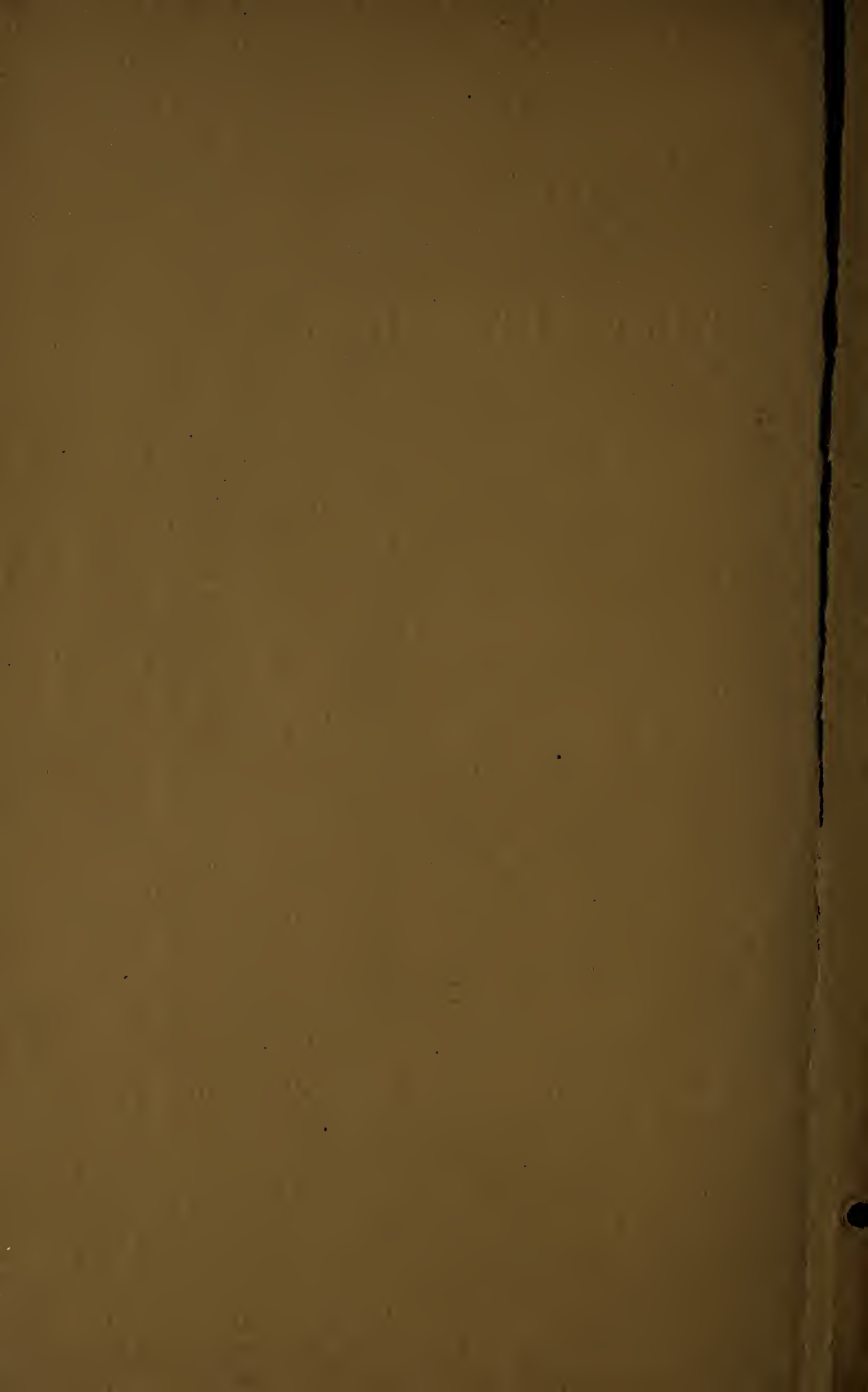


# HOME LIBRARIES.

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## HOME LIBRARIES.

BY CHARLES W. BIRTWELL.

The first Home Library was established by the Boston Children's Aid Society in January, 1887. Now it has seventy libraries here and there throughout Boston, and regards them as an important department of its work. The origin of the plan that has found so much favor in our eyes was simple. I had been connected with the Children's Aid Society but a short time when many avenues of work opened up before me, and it was quite perplexing to see how to make my relations to the various children I became acquainted with real and vital. Among other things the children ought to have the benefit of good reading and to become lovers of good books. Indeed, a great many things needed to be done for and by the children. Out of this opportunity and need the Home Library was evolved.

A little bookcase was designed. It was made of white wood, stained cherry, with a glass door and Yale lock. It contained a shelf for fifteen books, and above that another for juvenile periodicals. The whole thing, carefully designed and neatly made, was simple and yet pleasing to the eye.

I asked my little friend Rosa at the North End, Barbara over in South Boston, and Giovanni at the South End, if they would like little libraries in their homes, of which they should be the librarians, and from which their playmates or workmates might draw books, the supply to be replenished from time to time. They welcomed the idea heartily, and with me set about choosing the boys and girls of their respective neighborhoods who were to form the library groups. Then a time was appointed for the first meeting of each library. The children who had been enrolled as members met with me in the little librarian's home, and while one child held the lamp, another the screw-driver, another the screws, and the rest looked on, we sought a secure spot on the wall of the living room of the librarian's family, and there fastened the library.

I remember that to start the first library off with vigor, and secure the benefit from the beginning of a little *esprit de corps*, I went with the children the evening before the establishment of the library to see the cyclorama of the Battle of Gettysburg. We rode in a driving snowstorm in the street-cars from the North End, and had a gala evening. We got a bit acquainted, and on the next evening, the time appointed for the laying of the cornerstone of the whole Home Library structure, the first library, you may be sure the children without exception were on hand. I believe we had to wait a little while for Jennie, who lived across the hallway from Rosa, to "finish her dishes"; then up went the library. Very quickly the second library was established in South Boston, the third at the South End, and before long some neighborhoods were dotted with libraries.

The idea at the beginning was that the groups should be made up of fifteen children, but later we adopted ten as a better number. So the family in which a library was placed would have the books always within reach, and a handful of children from the same tenement-house or near neighborhood would have access to the books at the time set for their exchange, and when a group had extracted the juice from one set of books we would send them another. It was understood at the start that the children outside of the librarian's family should exchange their books only once a week. I dropped in on the children when I could, but soon saw that the effectiveness of the work would be increased by regular weekly meetings of each group. As it would be impossible for me to visit them all myself, volunteers were sought to take charge each of a single library. Quickly the visitors began to come to me with all manner of puzzles—how to get the children to keep their hands clean, how to induce them to read thoroughly, what to do for a child who was ill, or a lad who was playing truant. Out of these interviews with individual visitors grew naturally the thought of a monthly conference of the visitors; and from an early period in the history of the libraries we have met once a month, except during the summer, and spent an hour and a quarter in discussing a great variety of questions, some general and some particular, that arise in connection with the libraries.



I must dwell a moment on the selection of books. The aim was to put really good literature into the hands of the poor in such a way that they would grow to love that literature. People, after all, are not so unlike. A really good book, a book that is human, that touches our sense of rugged reality, or the fancy or imagination which is native to us and as real as anything in us, is sure of a welcome among all classes of people, if it is couched in intelligible terms. I chose some books that I happened to have read myself, but soon coming to the end of the list of which I was perfectly sure, and finding it impossible to review enough books myself, I secured the volunteer help of a number of ladies who understood the children of the poor and knew how to pass judgment on books proposed for their reading. It was definitely understood that every book should be read by the reviewers from cover to cover. We would not depend upon advertisements, hearsay, or vague recollections of books read by ourselves years ago, but every book should be read from beginning to end with the immediate question in view of the admission of the book to the little libraries to be read by the poor in the homes of the poor. Publishers and book-dealers sent us books for examination. Upon a careful consideration of the written reviews of the volunteer readers, prepared according to certain canons, was based the decision as to their acceptance or rejection. It seemed clearly not worth while to take to the poor books not really worth their reading. If good books would not be read, then the plan should be given up. Had we been careless in the selection of books, we easily might have done no little harm, and should not have learned that clean, unsensational, vigorous books that are loved by children in the homes of the well-to-do are welcome to children in the homes of the poor. The way to good taste in reading is not, as some curiously declare, through the mire of the dime novel and the sensational story, but straight along the clean, bright path of decent literature.

Although by reason of the natural preference of some visitors, or the effect of changes in groups at first made up of both sexes, some groups are wholly made up of boys and others of girls, the ideal group is a mixed one as regards both sex and age—ten boys and girls from

seven or eight to fifteen or sixteen years of age. Thus we provide for a healthful, unconscious association of the sexes and the training of the younger and older in their behavior toward one another, and in general touch the maximum range of relations, difficulties and services.

It follows from this make-up of a group that our books must be varied in order that in each set there shall be food for each child. So every library is made up of fifteen volumes, running the whole gamut from the nursery tale to "Tom Brown at Rugby" or "Uncle Tom's Cabin," and also selections from juvenile periodicals suited to children of different ages, there being five collections of periodicals in each library, each collection comprising a bound portion of the annual issue of some periodical. You will readily see, therefore, that in order to select a new library it is necessary to have forty or fifty approved and unassigned books to choose from, and never is a set made up with its fairy tales, pictures of sweet domestic life, stories of adventure, simple history and biography, short stories, long stories, fact and fancy, humor and pathos—never is a set made up, preliminary to starting out upon its first visit, without my mouth watering to read them all myself.

To put the books to an interesting test, but more especially to induce the children to read appreciatively and really use their minds as they read, a form was made out on which the librarian or visitor should record the opinion of each child in regard to each book he returns. The evolution of these opinions from the obnoxiously frequent "nice" and "very nice," or the occasionally refreshing "no good," of the early history of a group into really intelligent and discriminating opinions, is one of the sure marks of progress and value in the work.

A set of books usually remains with one group of children ten weeks or three months before it is exchanged for a fresh set, and in turn goes to another group. So you see the Home Libraries stand for nothing less than a perennial and constantly fresh stream of good literature.

To make sure of the parents being back of us in our relations to the children, we have a little blank application for membership, which is signed by the parent or guardian as well as the child. It is noticeable

that on many of these cards the children write not only their own names but the names of their parents, the latter, themselves unable to write, affixing their cross.

The volunteer visitors, as opportunity offers, on cards placed in their hands for the purpose, make a record of information concerning the family, their history, condition, habits, their reading at the inception of the library, and subsequently such items as may reveal their further history and the possible relation of the library to their life.

Close upon the heels of this effort to make books mean to poor children what they mean to the more fortunate, followed the idea of bringing to them a knowledge of those ways of having a good time within the walls of one's own castle that are so familiar in families where parents have leisure and ingenuity, and that make our childhood seem to our adult years, of a truth, a golden age. Without the elbow-room that some kinds of fun require, without money to buy games, without leisure to play them or to teach them to their children, forever held down by drudgery, forever pressed upon by the serious hand-to-hand fight to keep the wolf from the door, is it strange that the poor know next to nothing of the commonest home games and diversions? To the Home Libraries, a name sweet and dear to us who have had to do with them, came this further idea of Home Amusements. After the exchange of books, conversation about them, the recording of opinions, perhaps also reading aloud by the visitor or the children, they turn from books to play. It is the duty of the visitor to be informed in the art of merriment, and to teach the children all sorts of ways of having fun at home. Nor is it a slight advantage that thus inducement comes to the grown-up folks to look on and laugh too.

But as naturally as the rosebush grows, and more than a single bud appears and turns to blossom, so came another unfolding from the Home Libraries stock. "The destruction of the poor is their poverty." Might we not add to the home reading and home amusements inducements to Home Thrift. We began to get the children to save their pennies. Presently the Boston Stamp-Savings Society was established. So we purchase stamps from that society, and supply them to visitors. The visitors in turn sell them to the children at the weekly meetings.



The children are supplied with cards marked off into spaces in which they paste the pretty stamps as they buy them. When a card is filled, or when the total value of the stamps on a card is sufficient to make it worth while, perhaps fifty or seventy-five cents or a dollar, the stamps are redeemed, and the visitor goes with the child to open an account at some regular savings bank. The collection of pennies is resumed, to be followed by another redemption of the stamps and the swelling of the account at the savings bank.

I hardly need tell you that the Christmas festivities of the children are largely held under the auspices of the little libraries, or that in the warmer season you will find the visitors and children taking excursions together to the lovelier spots in the woods and at the shore. Once a year, too, we have a sale of plants. Last spring we sold three hundred and eighty-three plants to the children for windows and gardens. We have promised that all who will appear this autumn with live plants shall have a treat.

Through the visitors, too, we hear of cases of destitution, truancy, waywardness, and moral exposure, of unfit dwellings, and illegal liquor-selling. Such things we report to suitable agencies,—the other departments of our Children's Aid Society, the Associated Charities, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the Board of Health, the Law and Order League.

From all of this you will easily see why we think that ten children are enough for a single group or visitor. We expect the visitor to know not only the children of the group, but the families to which they belong, and as the children grow older, and are graduated from the little libraries, to follow them still as their friends. It is a highly important function of the Home Library to bring with good books a good friend, whose advice the children will seek, whose example they will aim to follow, and whose esteem they will not wish to forfeit.

We are having to face more and more the question of the graduates of the libraries. One thing we propose for them is a printed list of selected books that are in the Public Library with the numbers that they bear. These lists in the hands of our graduates we think will continue to guide them to the choice of good reading. So, too, we hope to see



our graduates go from the little libraries into the working girls' clubs, the associations for young men, and the workingmen's and workingwomen's clubs. And we want the love of good books, and all that good books stand for, to follow them.

We have now, about six years and a half since the first library was established, seventy libraries scattered throughout Boston, with sixty-three volunteer visitors and a membership of six hundred and thirty-four children. Since June, 1889, one paid assistant, a lady who was among the first volunteers in the work, has been employed, and has rendered most interested and efficient service. For the past two years we have employed also an extra summer assistant, as so many of the visitors are away during that season, and as we try to give every library group at least one outing during the midsummer months. A committee of the Board of Directors of the Boston Children's Aid Society have acted as volunteer visitors, and promoted and strengthened in various ways this department of the society.

From the beginning it has seemed best to let the experiment work itself out somewhat fully before attempting to say too much about it. A widespread demand, however, for fuller information has arisen, and Home Libraries are being established in various cities. I hope that before long a full record of the establishment and growth of the Home Libraries in Boston may be placed at the service of any who seek to adopt this form of philanthropic effort among the children of the poor.







